

America After Meritocracy: Chris Hayes's *The Twilight of The Elites*

[\[crossposted from Crooked Timber\]](#)

In his new book, *The Twilight of the Elites: America After Meritocracy*, Chris Hayes manages the impossible trifecta: the book is compellingly readable, impossibly erudite, and — most stunningly of all — correct. At the end, I was left with just two quibbles: first, the book's chapter on "pop epistemology" thoroughly explicated how elites got stuff wrong without bothering to mention the non-elites who got things right, leaving the reader with the all-too-common impression that getting it right was impossible; and second, the book never assembled its (surprisingly sophisticated) argument into a single summary. To discuss it, I feel we have to start with remedying the latter flaw:

Our nation's institutions have crumbled, Hayes argues. From 2000 to 2010 (the "Fail Decade"), every major societal institution failed. Big businesses collapsed with Enron and Worldcom, their auditors failed to catch it, the Supreme Court got partisan in *Bush v. Gore*, our intelligence apparatus failed to catch 9/11, the media lied us into wars, the military failed to win them, professional sports was all on steroids, the church engaged in and covered up sex abuse, the government compounded disaster upon disaster in Katrina, and the banks crashed our economy. How did it all go so wrong?

Hayes pins the blame on an unlikely suspect: meritocracy. We thought we would just simply pick out the best and raise them to the top, but once they got there they inevitably used their privilege to entrench themselves and their kids (inequality is, Hayes says, "autocatalytic"). Opening up the elite to more efficient competition didn't make things more fair, it just legitimated a more intense scramble. The result was an arms race among the elite, pushing all of them to embrace the most unscrupulous forms of cheating and fraud to secure their coveted positions. As competition takes over at the high end, personal worth resolves into exchange value, and the elite power accumulated in one sector can be traded for elite power in another: a regulator can become a bank VP, a modern TV host can use their stardom to become a bestselling author (try to imagine Edward R. Murrow using the nightly news to flog his books the way Bill O'Reilly does). This creates a unitary elite, detached from the bulk of society, yet at the same time even more insecure. You can never reach the pinnacle of the elite in this new world; even if you have the most successful TV show, are you also making blockbuster movies? bestselling books? winning Nobel Prizes? When your peers are the elite at large, you can never clearly best them.

The result is that our elites are trapped in a bubble, where the usual pointers toward accuracy (unanimity, proximity, good faith) only lead them astray. And their distance from the way the rest of the country really lives makes it impossible for them to do their jobs justly — they just don't get the necessary feedback. The only cure is to reduce economic inequality, a view that has surprisingly support among the population (clear majorities want to close the deficit by raising taxes on the rich, which is more than can be said for any other plan). And while Hayes is not a fan of heightening the contradictions, it is possible that the next crisis will bring with it the opportunity to win this change.

This is just a skeletal summary — the book itself is filled with luscious texture to demonstrate each point and more in-depth discussion of the mechanics of each mechanism (I would call it Elster meets Gladwell if I thought that would be taken as praise). [So buy the book already](#). Now, as I said, I think Hayes is broadly correct in his analysis. And I think his proposed solution is spot on as well — when we were fellows together at the Harvard Center for Ethics, I think we annoyed everyone else with our repeated insistence that reducing economic inequality was somehow always the appropriate solution to each of the many social ills the group identified.

But when talking to other elites about this proposal, I notice a confusion that's worth clarifying, about the *structural* results of inequality, rather than the merely quantitative ones. Class hangs over the book like a haunting spectre (there's a brief comment on p. 148 that "Mills [had] a more nuanced theory of elite power than Marx's concept of a ruling class") but I think it's hard to see how the solution relates to the problem without it. After all, we started by claiming the problem is meritocracy, but somehow the solution is taxing the rich?

The clue comes in thinking clearly about the alternative to meritocracy. It's not picking surgeons by lottery, Hayes clarifies, but then what is it? It's about ameliorating power relationships altogether. Meritocracy says "there must be one who rules, so let it be the best"; egalitarianism responds "why must there?" It's the power imbalance, rather than inequality itself, that's the problem.

Imagine a sci-fi world in which productivity has reached such impressive heights that everyone can have every good they desire just from the work young kids do for fun. By twiddling the knobs on their local MakerBot, the kids produce enough food, clothing, and iPhones to satisfy everyone. So instead of working, most people spend their days doing yoga or fishing. But scarcity hasn't completely faded away — there's still competition for the best spots at the fishing hole. So we continue to let those be allocated by the market: the fishing hole spot is charged for and the people who really want it earn the money to pay for it by helping people with various chores.

In this sort of world, inequality doesn't seem like much of a problem. Sure, some people get the best fishing hole spots, but that's because they did the most chores. If you want the spot more than they do, you can do more work. But the inequality doesn't come with power — the guy with the best fishing hole spot can't [say "fuck me or you're fired"](#).

This sci-fi world may sound ridiculous, but it's basically the one [Keynes predicted](#) we'd soon be living in:

Now it is true that the needs of human beings may seem to be insatiable. But they fall into two classes — those needs which are absolute in the sense that we feel them whatever the situation of our fellow human beings may be, and those which are relative in the sense that we feel them only if their satisfaction lifts us above, makes us feel superior to, our fellows. Needs of the second class, those which satisfy the desire for superiority, may indeed be insatiable; for the higher the general level, the higher still are they. But this is not so true of the absolute needs — a point may soon be reached, much sooner perhaps than we are all of us aware of, when these needs are satisfied in the sense that we prefer to devote our further energies to non-economic purposes.

[...] But, of course, it will all happen gradually, not as a catastrophe. Indeed, it has already begun. The course of affairs will simply be that there will be ever larger and larger classes and groups of people from whom problems of economic necessity have been practically removed.

And that's what a reduction in economic inequality could achieve. The trend in recent decades (since the fall of the Soviet Union and the ruling class's relief that "There Is No Alternative") has been for the people at the top to seize all the economic gains, leaving everyone else increasing insecure and dependent on their largesse. (Calling themselves "job creators", on this view, is not so much a brag as a threat.) But with less inequality, it could be otherwise. Instead of a world in which there are a handful of big networks with the money to run television shows, everyone could afford to have [their Sunday morning conversations](#) filmed and

livestreamed. Instead of only huge conglomerates having the capital and distribution to launch new product lines, everyone could make and market their own line of [underwear](#) or [video games](#) ([instead of just elite Red Sox pitchers](#)).

Even on strict efficiency grounds, this strikes me as a more alluring view than the usual meritocracy. Why put all your eggs in one basket, even if it's the best basket? Surely you'd get better results by giving more baskets a try.

You can argue that this is exactly where technology is bringing us — [popular kids on YouTube](#) get made into huge pop sensations, right? — and the genius of Hayes' book is to show us why this is not enough. The egalitarian demand shouldn't be that we need more black pop stars or female pop stars or YouTube sensation pop stars, but to question why we need elite superstars at all. I hope Hayes' next book shows us what the world without them is like.

You should follow me on twitter [here](#).

June 20, 2012